

3 ways to fund literacy coaching

California districts find creative ways to put coaching at the forefront

By Kiley Walsh Symonds

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"I never thought about it that way."

Jan Knight hears that a lot as a literacy coach in Walnut Creek, Calif. As she models lessons, observes instruction, and coaches, Knight's job is to help teachers re-evaluate how they're teaching literacy and help them try new strategies. Districts investing in literacy coaches say Knight and other coaches are making a difference.

Literacy coaches--classroom teachers who are released from teaching students to model lessons, observe classroom instruction, and coach teachers one-on-one or in grade-level groups--are a growing trend in the answer to a national call to focus on improving literacy, despite the fact that no current federal or California state funding is specifically designated to support coaches. In California, districts as large as San Diego and Los Angeles are investing in coaches. Nationally, districts such as Boston, Washington, D.C., and Districts 2 and 15 in New York are making coaching an integral part of their reform strategies.

Improving teachers' ability to teach all students to read and write well is a key leverage point to increasing student achievement. This is especially true because the field of literacy is changing rapidly, with advances in research providing more information about which skills children need to learn and by when, and how teachers can transfer these skills effectively. And research shows that when teacher training is combined with coaching, the result is a higher transfer of knowledge into practice than with any other method of professional development delivery (Joyce & Showers, 1995).

"(Hiring coaches) is the most incredible thing we've ever done," said Gwynneth Heil, assistant superintendent in Campbell Union High School District, another California district using literacy coaches. "Teachers trust the coaches. We're now getting veteran teachers who've never done any staff development saying, 'That's intriguing. Will you come into my classroom and model?'"

Main Benefits

The Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) is a foundation-funded nonprofit organization in San Francisco that provides regional grants and support to schools. Nearly 70% of BASRC's school districts, 18 of 26, support some form of literacy coaching. In 2001-02, BASRC conducted interviews and focus groups with teachers,

literacy coaches, principals and district administrators, observed coaches' meetings and coaching sessions, and coached teachers' classes to learn more about literacy coaching. All those involved reported that literacy coaching has helped teachers change their instructional practices and engage more students more effectively. The BASRC districts cite several benefits of coaching:

A collaborative culture

Teachers, coaches, and administrators reported in interviews and focus groups that when teachers meet regularly with coaches, distinct cultural shifts happen throughout the school, including increased teacher willingness and ability to collaborate, greater peer accountability, greater knowledge about other teachers' classrooms and instructional strategies, and better support for new teachers. This improved professional community also affects students' experiences of school. Stanford University's Center for Research on the Context of Teaching found that in schools where there is a high level of collaborative professional culture, students are more likely to report having respectful relationships with teachers and having a stronger sense of themselves as engaged and confident learners (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2002).

Greater receptivity to change

Coaches encourage teachers to "go outside their comfort zone," as one Campbell Union High School District coach put it, since coaches themselves take a risk demonstrating lessons in front of peers. Coaches thus create an environment of mutual accountability and shared learning. At the same time, coaches help teachers access new ideas and provide direct support, which enhances teachers' ability to critically examine their own practices, successfully implement new strategies, and reduce inconsistencies and gaps in programs.

A focus on equity

In interviews, both teachers and coaches report that coaches often help keep at-risk students central to teachers' instruction and planning, asking teachers hard questions and offering strategies to help. As one coach reflected, "not all teachers are doing (differentiated instruction). And they all have an excuse why not - numbers, materials. I say, 'It's OK if you're not using (a particular strategy), but how are you addressing struggling readers? It's hard for them to come up with an answer to that.'"

Increased leadership capacity

Coaches are able to share the responsibility for instructional leadership with principals and give principals an expanded support structure through which to work toward school goals. Coaches help link instruction with assessment, coordinating, designing, and conducting professional development and planning and/or facilitating teacher collaboration time. Coaches also develop their own leadership skills, leading some districts to consider them as future principals.

Walnut Creek

Piecing together a patchwork

Each of the 18 BASRC districts using literacy coaches has implemented the strategy with varying structures and funding.

In the Walnut Creek School District, each of the five elementary schools has a full-time literacy coach. In the district's intermediate school, the 6th- and 7th-grade literacy coordinators receive stipends to work with teachers after school.

The district was able to fund these stipends and the full-time coaches, as well as their classroom replacements, through a combination of the district's general fund, a BASRC grant, and funding from a patchwork of programs such as Title I, Title II, and California's School Improvement Program (SIP).

To create and fill the coaching positions in 2000, the district developed a job description, principals identified candidates, and the district made final hiring decisions. Teaching experience among the six coaches ranges from just over five years to more than three decades. Literacy coaches work with teachers individually and in grade-level teams, observe classroom instruction, demonstrate literacy strategies in classrooms, help teachers link assessment to instruction, and help teachers access and use research. Coaches meet with all the elementary school teachers in grade-level teams at each school twice a month during collaboration time. Schools provide 2 1/4 hours of collaboration time for each grade-level group every week, and coaches facilitate two of these sessions per month. Literacy coaches set meeting agendas based on teachers' input and their own assessment of what grade levels need to work on to meet district goals. During grade-level collaboration time, teachers ask questions and compare notes about how different instructional strategies are affecting student achievement. As they debate the effectiveness of their techniques, they also make decisions about alternative instructional approaches.

"Collaboration focuses right in on strategies teachers are using in the classroom," said Maureen Fornengo, a coach at Buena Vista Elementary School in Walnut Creek, Calif.

Walnut Creek School District

Walnut Creek, Calif.

A suburban district about 25 miles east of San Francisco

Grades: K-8

Enrollment: 3,268

Schools: Five elementaries and one intermediate (grades 6-7)

Staff: 185

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	75.7%
Black:	2.3%
Hispanic:	8%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	12.7%
Native American:	0.6%
Other:	0.7%

Limited English proficient: 9.2%

Languages spoken: 26 beyond English, mainly Spanish, Russian, and Farsi

Free/reduced lunch: 6.3%

Special education: 9.5%

Contact: Leslie Rupley, director of curriculum
960 Ygnacio Valley Road
Walnut Creek, CA 94596

Phone: (925) 944-6850

Fax: (925) 944-1768

E-mail: LRUPLEY@wcsd.k12.ca.us

The coaches' own professional learning occurs in a full-day meeting every month facilitated by the district's director of curriculum. The meetings are a balance of peer support and professional development focused on a variety of district-supported, research-based literacy strategies. Coaches discuss challenges in their work, share new research and materials, and discuss and select their own professional development opportunities. The district also has a literacy team meeting for a half-day every month with the coaches, the principals, the superintendent, the director of curriculum, and a teacher representative from every school. This group focuses on how to lead literacy reform and align the work and goals of the coaches, the principals, and the district.

Campbell Union High School District **Pulling from multiple pots**

In 2002-03, Campbell had a full-time coach in each of its 10 elementary schools and 1.5 FTEs in each of three middle schools. To find the money needed, Campbell looked at every funding source that could possibly be used. "There are pockets of money all over the place," Assistant Superintendent Gwynneth Heil said. After some investigation, the district realized that "if we put them together, we could do it. So we just decided to do it."

Each position is funded a little differently. The district uses funds linked to specific student populations, such as Title I and California's English Language

Acquisition Program (ELAP), to underwrite coaching positions at schools serving the designated student populations. Funds tied to certain grade levels are used to fund coaches who work with those grades. A BASRC grant funded some released time for training in 2001-02 and a portion of 2002-03 salaries.

Coaches are interviewed, hired, and supervised by the Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) Joint Panel, a district-based team formed through a state program that supports both new teachers and tenured teachers who have received an unsatisfactory evaluation. Campbell requires coaches to have at least five years of classroom experience to apply and be

Campbell Union High School District

San Jose, Calif.

The district covers parts of San Jose, Campbell, Los Gatos, and Saratoga

Grades: K-8

Enrollment: 7,587

Schools: 10 elementary and three middle schools (6-8)

Staff: 430

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	46.4%
Black:	5.2%
Hispanic:	31.3%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	16.6%
Native American:	0.5%
Other:	0%

Limited English proficient: 23.9%

Languages spoken: 37, including Spanish, Vietnamese, and Korean

Free/reduced lunch: 25.4%

Special education: 8.9%

Contact:	Johanna VanderMolen, superintendent 155 North Third St. Campbell, CA 95008
Phone:	(408) 341-7211
Fax:	(408) 431-7280
E-mail:	jvandermolencampbellusd.k12.ca.us

recommended by their principals. The district invests heavily in coaches' professional learning. They receive a full year of training before they are released as full-time coaches. During the training year, they are mentored by experienced coaches and take part in sessions with an outside consultant on Literacy Connection, a standards- and research-based literacy program with delivery strategies and assessments.

"It's critical that we have coaches be on the cutting edge of what's happening in the research as far as student learning," said Superintendent Johanna VanderMolen. "This is a lot of money that we're putting into this program and the coaches."

The coaches and the district's director of curriculum and professional development meet weekly for a half- or full-day of professional development. Together coaches develop norms for successful coaching and hone effective strategies for listening and questioning. Coaches in Campbell are part of their schools' leadership teams and also meet frequently with their principals. The district also has principals meet monthly for half- or full-day professional development sessions to be trained in the same strategies as the coaches.

Campbell coaches focus on grades 3 through 8, splitting their time evenly between new and veteran teachers. They demonstrate lessons, observe classes, coach teachers one-on-one and in groups, provide professional development sessions for all staff, help teachers link instruction to assessment, and teach summer school with new teachers. Demonstrating lessons is the cornerstone of the initiative.

"If you just go to a seminar, the folder goes on the cabinet," said Coach Diane Sanck. "When someone from outside is able to come in and demonstrate, you're more likely to implement the strategies."

The coaches in Campbell return to the classroom after three years. "It's largely to make sure we are current," a coach said. "I know a lot of times in staff development you'll think, 'Well, they haven't been in a classroom for 20 years. What do they know?'" Cycling the coaches back into the classroom keeps teachers from perceiving them as outsiders.

East Side Union High School District

San Jose, Calif.

Grades: 9-12

Enrollment: 23,665

Schools: 10 high schools

Staff: 1,122

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	16.0%
Black:	4.6%
Hispanic:	40.7%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	38.3%
Native American:	0.4%
Other:	0%

East Side Union High School District Mixing and matching

Each one of the East Side Union High School District's 10 comprehensive high schools has a full-time literacy coaching position. Most funding is from Title I, for qualifying schools, as well as California's Economic Impact Aid program, Gifted and Talented Education (GATE), and the district's staff development funds. The district also uses state Volunteer Integration Program money. A BASRC grant pays for some professional development and collaboration time.

Principals hired the coaches, most of whom are former high school English teachers or have backgrounds as reading specialists or English language development teachers. The district required only that coaches have successful teaching backgrounds.

East Side coaches regularly work one-on-one with teachers. But since faculty sizes range from about 80 to 220, coaches must choose with whom they work. In schools the state has determined are underperforming, coaches work with teachers who teach the largest number of at-risk kids. The definition of "at risk" varies by school.

The literacy coaches work with teachers across all subjects, including subjects not focused on literacy, like math and science. Teachers in other subject areas "are concerned with losing their curriculum," Coach Carol Hogland said. "But they don't need to be. On every social studies quiz, have an essay question. On every science true/false test, also ask 'Why?' to get them writing. Math can use word problems."

The coaches' role in the school's leadership team varies. Some have minimal contact with the leadership team, while others are the leadership's official representatives at regular meetings. In addition to their vast classroom experience preparing them for their new roles, the East Side Union coaches met together once every two or three weeks during the first year of the coaching initiative for professional development sessions. In addition, an external consultant designed a year-long curriculum focused on successful strategies for working with adult learners. Together they reviewed reading programs, fundamental issues of reading, how to conduct observations, and videotapes of their classroom work with teachers. In the initiative's second year, coaches met formally once a month. Topics included training on the district's data system to look at SAT-9 and district assessment scores, reciprocal teaching, and how to read and use a district assessment that diagnoses students' reading skill gaps.

Limited English proficient:
21.4%
Languages spoken: 38,
including Spanish, Vietnamese,
Khmer
Free/reduced lunch: 18.8%
Special education: 9.8%

Contact: Dan Ordaz,
assistant
superintendent of
instructional
services
830 North Capitol
Ave.
San Jose, CA
95133-1316

Phone: (408) 347-5060
Fax: (408) 347-5015
E-mail: ordazd@esuhsd.org

Conclusion

Classroom practice, the most important component of the education system, is the hardest for a district to change. District actions are often superficial - few changes reach the heart of teaching and learning. Yet to achieve systemwide improvement rather than random pieces, district support is essential. As districts support teachers in improving their practices, giving them time to collaborate, providing professional development, mentoring, and the coaching teachers need to hone their craft, districts redefine their role as school-supporting institutions.

References

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Recommendations to districts

Make literacy coaching one of a few high-priority strategies.

"If I were to talk to other superintendents about a recommendation, the biggest thing is to get your priorities straight," said Campbell Union (San Jose, Calif.) Superintendent Johanna VanderMolen. "If (literacy coaching) is not your priority, don't step into it. Because what you will have to do is look at every aspect of the district and reorganize so that you can have your emphasis be your coaches. It doesn't make sense to have a coaching perspective and just put it on top of everything else."

Take funding from other initiatives.

"You reorganize how your money is allocated," VanderMolen said. "If you add coaches, you need to be prepared to change your organization." Walnut Creek (Calif.) Superintendent Mike De Sa agreed, stressing the importance of coaches "vs. maybe an aide who's been photocopying or working in an area for the last 10 years when the district doesn't really need an aide in that area. ... You have to fight to align your priorities with your budget."

Ensure the superintendent, the board, and community see coaching as a priority.

"It can't start from the director of curriculum, even if the money's there, because the superintendent will pull them off and put them on other things," VanderMolen said. "If the superintendent's priority is maintenance, the budget will stay in maintenance." Prioritizing funding also means developing political support in the community. "By

talking about this with parents and the governing board," De Sa said, "I'm hoping that when push comes to shove in some of these tough budget years, their financial priority is the literacy coach."

Change and even eliminate other district positions.

"You wind up being very thin in many departments," VanderMolen admitted. "But throw money in where you know it's going to make a difference. And the rest - you're going to have to find a way to make it work. My job has changed. I'm picking up things that normally a superintendent wouldn't do. If we cut two coaches, we could have another position in the district office. That's really a tough choice to make for some districts. Do we have two coaches or do we have two coordinators down here? The answer for us has to be the coaches."

About the Author

Kiley Walsh Symonds is the policy director of the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC). You can contact her at BASRC, 181 Fremont Street, 2nd floor, San Francisco, CA 94105, (415) 348-5519, fax (415) 348-1340, email: ksymonds@basrc.org.